

Narrative Theory in Light of Contemporary Narrative Practice

Honors Research Thesis

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by

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## Introduction

In recent decades, the corpus of stories being investigated by scholars of narrative has grown to include a wide range of genres and media. Instead of focusing solely on monomodal print texts, scholars have opened up the discussion of narrative theory to include films, video games, and graphic novels. Narratives themselves have also continued to evolve, providing new challenges for narrative theorists.

As the corpus of narratives expands, existing theories of narrative must be revisited and in some cases modified to account for new narrative phenomena. The goal of my project is to show how contemporary work in narrative theory helps to enrich our understanding of three contemporary examples of experimental storytelling—Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*—but also how these three case studies generate new questions about narrative and invite us to revisit and expand existing frameworks for the study of stories. My project is divided into three chapters, which deal with three different aspects of narrative and narrative interpretation: intertextuality, rereading and reader response, and fictional and factual worlds. Further, because Bechdel's text is a graphic memoir, my study also considers how issues of medium specificity affect concepts developed by theorists of narrative.

In my first chapter, I consider questions of intertextuality, focusing specifically on Christian Moraru's concept of the postmodern rewrite. Moraru defines the postmodern rewrite as a narrative that rewrites a single text in an obvious way in service of a larger ideological critique. I argue that each of my three case studies acts as a postmodern rewrite in a way that Moraru's framework does not account for. Because *Fun Home* is a

multimodal narrative, for example, it is able to rewrite several texts with a higher degree of narrative economy than would be possible in a print text. *Atonement*, on the other hand, rewrites the entire modernist tradition by shifting from an epistemological dominant to an ontological dominant. Similarly, *Never Let Me Go* rewrites classic dystopian fiction by subverting its common tropes in the service of a larger social critique.

In my second chapter, I argue that the models of configuration and reconfiguration laid out by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz must be expanded to consider how the process of rereading differs from that of an initial reading. Narratives with surprise endings, I contend, illustrate this difference especially well. Drawing on Phelan's argument that surprise endings can only be effective if they are prepared for throughout the narrative, I argue that the process of rereading such narratives involves a dialogue between the rereader and his or her first-time-reading self, in that the rereader looks for clues that he or she missed in his or her initial reading. I also contend that the process of rereading invites the reader to reconfigure his or her judgments of the narrator.

Finally, in my third chapter, I draw on the work of Dorrit Cohn, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Lubomír Doležel, arguing that each of my three case studies presents a unique area of overlap between fictional and factual narrative that these scholars' frameworks do not account for. *Fun Home*, for instance, complicates Cohn's distinction between factual biography and third-person fiction through its use of fictional analogues in narrating the lives of actual persons. In my discussion of *Atonement*, I argue that Ryan's concept of fictional recentering must be expanded to consider instances of recentering that are hidden from the reader; I call this unique type of recentering "embedded recentering."

Finally, I argue that the counterfactual history contained in *Never Let Me Go* challenges Doležel's distinction between the historian's counterfactual history and the fiction maker's counterfactual history. While Doležel contends that the fiction maker's counterfactual history always functions as a postmodernist parody, I argue that Ishiguro uses his counterfactual history in *Never Let Me Go* as a thought experiment--thus undercutting Doležel's account of the uses and effects of counterfactual history itself.

## Chapter 1: Intertextuality

Over the past several decades, theorists of literature, culture, and language have developed different ways of understanding intertextuality, or the way a given text relates to a larger constellation of texts. Some of these accounts—especially those of the Russian Formalists and structuralist narratologists—are staggeringly broad, casting intertextuality as a universal feature of all literary works. Other accounts, however, are more restrictive, using as a criterion for intertextuality the actual presence of one text in another text. Some theorists argue that postmodernist texts feature their own unique brand of limited intertextuality; in fact, some scholars contend that the extensive use of intertextuality is one of postmodernism’s defining characteristics (Moraru, “Intertextuality”).

Christian Moraru has done important work on concepts of postmodern intertextuality, particularly in connection with the genre of the postmodern rewrite. According to Moraru, for a text to qualify as a postmodern rewrite, the rewriting must be “*there* in various degrees of obviousness” (“Rewriting” 19, his italics). In other words, the analysis of the presence of the rewritten text in the rewrite should not depend on “constitutive judgment,” as Genette calls it (“Palimpsests” 9); its presence should be obvious without the reader having to make a case for it. More importantly, there must exist “a ‘rupture’ between [rewriters] and what they redo... as well as between themselves and various hegemonic forces active at the moment” (Moraru 9). Postmodern rewrites engage with and critique the ideology found in their source texts, often reframing the story from a perspective that is ideologically marginalized in the original (9).

This emphasis on an ideological reworking of the rewritten text sets Moraru's model apart from other models of intertextuality, and also makes it productive for the analysis of postmodern texts, many of which use earlier works both as scaffolding for storytelling and as ideological artifacts subject to deconstruction. In this chapter, I argue that the authors of each of my three case studies engage in acts of postmodern rewriting, but do so in such a way that invites us to expand Moraru's framework.

### ***Fun Home***

It is difficult to imagine a work more densely intertextual than *Fun Home*. The complex network of literary allusions Bechdel creates is central to the work's style as well as its narrative structure; at one point Bechdel herself admits that she "employ[s] these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms" (67). Bechdel tells her family's story by telling other stories with which the reader, she assumes, is familiar.

At the same time, this use of intertextuality is more than just a narrative device. In her essay "Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," Ariela Freedman argues that by "citing, revising, and challenging" these works, the bulk of which belong to the modernist tradition, Bechdel is "making a space for herself on the shelf of modernist literature" (126). I contend, however, that the relationship of *Fun Home* to the modernist canon is more complicated than Freedman's remarks would suggest. While Bechdel certainly situates *Fun Home* in dialogue with modernist literature, that dialogue involves critique and deconstructive dismantling to a degree that Freedman does not explicitly acknowledge. In Moraru's terms, Bechdel creates a "rupture" between *Fun Home* and the modernist canon (9).

In writing *Fun Home* as a graphic memoir, Bechdel has at her disposal a set of tools for this critical rewriting that are unique to the medium. This set of tools is afforded by the multimodal nature of the graphic memoir – that is, its use of two semiotic “environments,” the verbal and the visual, as opposed to the single semiotic environment of a monomodal work, such as a novel (Herman 197; see also Kress and van Leeuwen). Bechdel spreads her intertextual references across each of these two modes, thereby complicating both the reader’s sense of that intertextuality as “obvious” and the relation of Bechdel’s narrative to the intertexts it invokes.

Moraru notes that “[a] few intertexts, insufficiently developed or not pivotal enough to the work, do not make it a rewrite” (20). In *Fun Home*, the relative importance of a given intertext is not always clear. Certainly, it would be difficult to argue that Bechdel’s inclusion of a *Hardy Boys* novel in one panel of the memoir constitutes an entire rewrite of the *Hardy Boys* series (141). At times, however, the works Bechdel conspicuously places in the visual track seem to have quite a bit to do with the Bechdel’s own narrative. Freedman refers in particular to Bechdel’s inclusion of an image of *Anna Karenina* in a panel on the first page of the memoir; as Freedman notes, this visual quotation of Tolstoy’s novel “foreshadows [Alison’s] father’s later suicide, and complicates the reference to Icarus” (131). Likewise, Umberto Eco’s *The Role of the Reader*, visible on a library shelf in another panel (Bechdel 74), is certainly relevant to *Fun Home*, a work whose extensive network of intertextuality “assumes and constructs an erudite reader” (Pearl 287). Does this make *Fun Home* a rewrite of *The Role of the Reader* for the postmodern age? Moraru would probably say not, given that this particular intertext is “insufficiently developed” (20) in the context of memoir as a whole.

What I wish to emphasize here, however, is that the multimodal nature of the narration allows for a sort of rewriting that is not possible in a monomodal text. By visually referring to these intertexts while carrying on with self-narration in the verbal track, Bechdel literally rewrites the intertext by situating it in a multimodal environment and at the same allowing the narrative and other discourses conveyed by each mode to comment on one another.

While Bechdel's brief visual references to book titles enact this multimodal rewriting on a small scale, she also employs more extended and complex allusions involving the interplay between words and images. In one instance, Bechdel tells the story of her parents' marriage and subsequent trip to Paris, while simultaneously synthesizing Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*. In the verbal track, Bechdel relates James' tale, with a brief interruption to explain verbally the circumstances of her parents' trip. In the visual track, Bechdel illustrates that trip. Her synopsis itself is literally a rewrite, of course, but it is one that maintains the norms and values associated with the original text. Thus when Bechdel describes Isabel Archer, the heroine of *The Portrait of a Lady*, to be "perverse" in her acceptance of Gilbert Osmond, a "culturally dissipated, and penniless European art collector," she is transcribing how Isabel eventually comes to be seen in James' original work (71).

At the same time, however, Bechdel retells James' story by drawing on events from her own life story, which she illustrates in the visual track. In doing so, she draws out the tensions between her multimodal rewrite and the original text. She begins with a drawing of her mother's passport photograph, which a caption tells us is from before her marriage to Bruce. The next frame shows Helen, Alison's mother, meeting Bruce at an



airport in Germany. These frames correspond with the beginning of Bechdel's synopsis, in which she describes Isabel leaving America for Europe and "perversely" accepting Gilbert Osmond (71). In this instance, Bechdel's rewrite is a personal update of the original; she recasts the characters in her own story as characters in *The Portrait*. The parallel continues as Bechdel tells (and shows) us that, eventually, both Isabel and Helen learn of their husbands' affairs. To conclude her rewrite of James, Bechdel includes a passport photograph of Helen from eight years later, using the visual track to highlight the effect that such an unhealthy marriage has on Helen. Even as she draws out such parallels between James' tale and her own, however, she critiques the ideology of *The Portrait*. For example, while Gilbert's affair is with the woman who introduced him to Isabel, Bruce's affair is with a man. Given the context of *Fun Home* as a whole, this reframes and complicates the storyline of *The Portrait*, in which Isabel is the victim in her relationship with Gilbert. In this case, while Helen is still clearly victimized by Bruce's violent and unfaithful behavior, Bechdel paints Bruce as a victim, as well, one whose less-than-laudable behavior may arise from his inability to come out as homosexual in an oppressive and homophobic world. In this way, in accordance with Moraru's account of postmodern rewrites, Bechdel does not merely engage explicitly with James' prior text, but also critiques the ideological structures with which the source text is more or less complicit.

Bechdel makes further use of this technique in the memoir's fourth chapter, which features an extended comparison of Bruce Bechdel and Marcel Proust. In one particular scene, Bechdel illustrates her family digging up some trees from a local park to plant in their own backyard, where their babysitter Roy joins them (93). In the verbal track, she

summarizes a passage from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, describing how the narrator falls in love with a young girl who is indistinguishable from the surrounding flowers. She follows up this summary with a discussion of Proust's personal life and his relationships with young men. With the juxtaposition of these two stories, Bechdel effectively retells the segment of Proust's tale, replacing the narrator and the little girl with Bruce and Roy, respectively, while engaging in a Proustian comparison of Bruce's love of Roy with his love of natural beauty. Of course, we know that the circumstances of their relationship are not unproblematic – their relationship is clearly sexual, and Roy is a minor. Indeed, Bechdel juxtaposes her own morally complex tale with Proust's romanticized one to emphasize the voiceless, disempowered position of the fetishized characters in both stories.

In *Fun Home*, then, Bechdel uses the graphic memoir's multiple semiotic channels in order to engage with a multitude of intertexts with a greater degree of narrative economy than could be achieved in a monomodal account. By including intertextual references (such as illustrations of books) in the visual track, while carrying on her own narration in the verbal track, Bechdel allows her narrative to comment on the intertexts, and vice versa. Bechdel also uses the two semiotic channels to engage more extensively with certain intertexts, telling her own story in the visual track while rewriting an intertext in the verbal track. This method allows Bechdel not only to draw out the parallels between the narratives, but also to subject the intertext to a process of ideological critique. Ultimately, *Fun Home* engages in a kind of postmodern rewriting that Moraru's framework does not account for, not only through its use of medium-

specific techniques, but also in the way it complicates the question of the “obviousness” of a rewrite.

### *Atonement*

Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, a passage from which serves as the opening epigraph of *Atonement*, is only the first of many intertexts found in McEwan’s novel. It is not even the novel’s only reference to Austen, whose intertextual significance for *Atonement* has been discussed at length (see Hidalgo). *Atonement* is “a work of fiction that is from beginning to end concerned with the making of fiction” (Finney 69), and its concern with fiction is often manifested intertextually, as Briony, in developing her ever-changing identity as a writer, shifts among various literary movements and practices. Briony’s initial attraction to and eventual rejection of the literary ideals of modernism are particularly relevant to my project here, as they constitute a certain kind of postmodern rewrite, albeit one that again (in a different way than *Fun Home*) complicates the boundaries of Moraru’s framework.

As noted previously, Moraru’s concept of the postmodern rewrite is premised on a specific kind of intertextuality, one that is characterized by an obvious, one-to-one correspondence between two texts, with the rewrite in some way critiquing the rewritten text. But despite extensive plot similarities with individual texts such as Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (see Hidalgo and D’Angelo), McEwan’s novel is not a direct rewrite of a single source, at least not in a way that is suggested by Moraru’s framework. Instead, *Atonement* positions itself in relation to an intertext, or rather a cluster of intertexts, that stands somewhere between Moraru’s conceptions of “universal” and “specific” intertextuality--that is, between the general condition of being

one text in a larger tradition of texts, on the one hand, and the making of targeted allusions to a particular precursor text, on the other hand. In the case of *Atonement*, the cluster of intertexts by virtue of which McEwan's novel situates itself between these two poles of cross-textual reference is the cluster of narratives associated with modernist fiction.

My suggestion is that, apart from being merely architextual, or of merely taxonomic or literary-historical significance (Genette, "Palimpsests" 4), *Atonement's* relationship to modernism also disrupts the simple dichotomy of general versus specific intertextuality. The first three sections of the novel are in many ways a straightforward continuation of the modernist tradition, complete with fragmented perspectives and a focus on internal consciousness. The novel's epilogue, however, breaks from this traditional modernist aesthetic when it reveals that the reader has actually just finished Briony's own novel, and that Briony has fabricated the ending. Thus, by virtue of its larger structure, McEwan's text rewrites modernist fiction by unwriting it.

The ending of *Atonement* has received much critical attention, and for good reason. The revelation that Briony has been narrating and taking significant poetic license with the entire novel is decidedly jarring, and it also has numerous implications for the reader's relationship to the novel. Paul Crosthwaite compares how the novel's ending affects readers with the way trauma affects war veterans: "The likely effects of these baleful revelations on a reader correspond in various ways to the temporal structure... of a traumatic episode" (63). James Phelan focuses instead on the narrative judgments that the ending asks the reader to make, arguing that McEwan leads us to question our readiness to accept Briony's romanticized version of the story (130). Despite

the difference in angles, Crosthwaite and Phelan, like most commentators on the novel, discuss Briony's revelation as a sort of rupture in the text, one that retroactively alters what came before it. Returning to Moraru's framework, I argue that the rupture of Briony's revelation also acts as a rupture in Moraru's sense, creating a rift between the ultimately postmodern *Atonement* and the modernism it rewrites.

The first three sections of *Atonement* are intertextual with modernism not just because they mention modernist and late-modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, but also because they exhibit an epistemological dominant--to use Brian McHale's terms. In other words, these sections focus on questions of knowledge, a feature that separates modernist fiction from postmodernist fiction, which is primarily concerned with ontological issues, or questions about what is real versus imagined in the world of the narrative (McHale 9-11). Alan Palmer summarizes the difference by articulating two questions, modernism's being "How can we *know* reality?" and postmodernism's being "What *is* reality?" (276). The epistemological dominant of *Atonement*'s first three sections manifests itself in the levels of both story and discourse. That is to say, questions of knowledge are raised by the events of the story – most notably, by young Briony's own writings – but also by the way that the story is told. The first section, for instance, is told in fourteen chapters, and those chapters are focalized through a variety of characters. While the temporal movement is largely chronological, the narrative is sometimes multiply focalized, doubling back to provide two or more perspectives on the same event. This is the case in chapters two and three, both of which depict Robbie and Cecilia conversing by the fountain, where Robbie accidentally causes Cecilia to break a valuable family vase, and Cecilia gets into the fountain to retrieve the

broken piece. In the first of these two chapters, the focalization alternates between Cecilia and Robbie, while the next chapter relates the scene as Briony witnessed it. This emphasis on perspective underscores the modernist preoccupation with how characters with different viewpoints come to experience and internalize the same reality in different ways. Importantly, the reality itself appears stable and unified – it is the human perception of that reality which is fragmented.

As previously noted, these epistemological also surface at the story level. Indeed, the very scene by the fountain serves as a sort of “revelation” to Briony: “Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention... the scene could be recast, through Cecilia’s eyes, and then Robbie’s” (McEwan 52). Here, the young Briony begins to realize the benefits of a modernist aesthetic. Again, there exists a “truth” in her formulation, but the only access to that truth is through three differing perspectives.

The novel's intertextual connections with modernist narratives come to the fore even more explicitly in the letter of rejection that Briony receives from *Horizon*. In the letter, the magazine’s editor Cyril Connolly praises Briony’s potential as a writer, but suggests that she borrows a little too heavily from “Mrs. Woolf,” and that her novella lacks the “underlying pull of simple narrative” (McEwan 402). Connolly then offers Briony some suggestions, proposing that instead of “dwell[ing] for quite so long on the perceptions of each of the three figures,” she might “create some tension, some light and shade within the narrative itself” (McEwan 404). Connolly’s letter essentially serves as a discussion of the merits and drawbacks of the modernist aesthetic, or at least Briony’s

version of that aesthetic. Indeed, given that Connolly equates Briony's novella with the writings of Virginia Woolf, and attributes some of his own suggestions to Elizabeth Bowen, the letter seems to privilege one kind of modernism over another. For McEwan, modernism is not a monolithic whole, but a temporally emergent phenomenon, and its later period, represented by Bowen, is already engaged in a rewriting of its earlier, "high" period, represented by Woolf.

This explicit discussion of modernist fiction foregrounds the epistemological focus of the first three sections of the novel. But with Briony's late revelation that she herself has narrated the previous sections of what we took to be a heterodiegetic fictional text comes an abrupt shift in dominant. All of the sudden, the primary question is not whose version of events is most reliable, but whether those events actually took place at all. What is most significant here, however, is that the epilogue does not pose a new set of epistemological questions, but instead changes the nature of the questions raised in the novel's first three sections – questions articulated through both the discourse and the story levels of the novel. The novel's variable focalization, for instance, no longer represents an attempt to capture truth through a set of different yet overlapping perspectives. With Briony proving to be the agent ultimately in control of the narration, the question now becomes: "Which of these events actually occurred?" Alan Palmer makes this point when he discusses the several different Robbies present in the novel. Some of the Robbies in the novel, he argues, such as the one at Dunkirk represented in the novel's second section, are so distant from Briony that their actions and experiences would have been totally inaccessible to her. Others, such as the one at the Balham flat,

never existed at all (Palmer 295). Thus, the initial focus on perspective is trumped by the ultimate question of ontology: what is real, and what isn't?

This shift in focus is even more apparent at the story level, particularly when the reader reaches the end of the text. At this stage Cyril Connolly's letter to Briony, which initially seemed to have as its focus the strengths and weaknesses of the modernist aesthetic, now raises a much larger question. The suggestions that Connolly offers to Briony concern not only Briony's novella-within-the-novel, but also the entire narrative of *Atonement*. Connolly asks Briony, "If this girl has so fully misunderstood... the strange little scene that has unfolded before her, how might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion?" (McEwan 403). The suggestions go on, and in light of the reader's newfound knowledge that the first three sections of *Atonement* are actually the latest draft of the text that began as Briony's novella, the ontological status of many of the novel's key events comes into question. If Briony didn't include in her story any indication how she came between Robbie and Cecilia until after Connolly suggested that she do so, did it actually happen? Is everything after the scene at the fountain a fabrication, included only at Connolly's behest? Or is the letter itself a fabrication, used as a kind of plot device?

Thus, although *Atonement* does not rewrite a specific modernist text, Moraru's concept of the postmodern rewrite provides a helpful framework for analyzing the ways in which the novel engages with the modernist tradition as a whole--even as McEwan's text thereby invites reflection on the scope and limits of Moraru's account. While the novel initially appears to be concerned with the kind of epistemological questions asked by modernist texts, its epilogue essentially rewrites what came before it, shifting the



novel's dominant from an epistemological one to an ontological one. In doing so, the novel rewrites the modernist tradition itself, eschewing that tradition's techniques and central issues in favor of the techniques and issues of postmodernism. By engaging with the modernist tradition in this way, *Atonement* invites us to expand Moraru's framework to consider the ways in which narratives can rewrite not only individual texts, but entire literary movements.

### ***Never Let Me Go***

Ideological critique is central to Moraru's concept of the postmodern rewrite. That is, the texts Moraru considers postmodern rewrites not only rework the narrative of the texts they rewrite, but they also expose and subvert the ideology found in those texts, often telling the story from an ideological perspective that is marginalized in the source text. As I hope to have demonstrated in my previous section, it is useful to expand this notion of the postmodern rewrite to texts that offer a critique of entire literary movements or traditions, as *Atonement* does with the modernist novel. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is likewise relevant in this connection, its intertextual precursor being the tradition of the dystopian novel. However, Ishiguro's reworking of the conventions of dystopian fiction found in such canonized texts as Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* functions not as a critique of those earlier texts, but rather as an update of the genre for purposes of critiquing contemporary social practices.

The tradition of the dystopian novel is itself characterized by ideological critique. As the term "dystopian" makes clear, these novels focus on the dark side of an imagined utopia, critiquing the "potential negative implications of certain forms of utopian thought" (Booker 127-128). Their critiques, however, go much deeper than this. The

problems that arise in the fictional dystopias explored in these novels are often grounded in the social reality of the author's time (Booker 127-128). In *Brave New World*, for instance, the fear of a world in which classes of humans are engineered to perform specific tasks reflects Huxley's own fears about society's growing reliance on consumerism and mass production in the 1920s; in the world of the novel, religion has been replaced with the worship of Henry Ford and the Model T. Even so, these critiques lack a certain immediacy, given that the worlds of these novels stand at a certain distance from our own. In fact, the disparity between the dystopian world and the real world is what characterizes the traditional dystopian critique; in their role as cautionary tales, canonical dystopian novels essentially argue "this is how different our world will look if our society continues to develop along lines more or less evident today." By contrast, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro reduces the distance between the dystopian world and the real world, emphasizing instead the similarities that the dystopian world shares with our own world. His critique, then, is not of what our society could become, but of what it already is.

The most telling sign of this rewriting is the novel's setting. Generally, dystopian novels are set in worlds that are more or less dissimilar to the actual, historical world occupied by readers, both geographically (or at least geopolitically) and temporally. *Brave New World*, for instance, takes place in the year A.F. 632 (Huxley 4) – that is, 632 years after Henry Ford, or the year 2540 according to our calendar – in the Western European section of the World State. Although there are some carryovers from the Western Europe of the real world, such as the name "Europe" and the existence of the works of Shakespeare, the novel is set so far in the future that its Europe contains almost

no other traces of the real Europe of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By contrast, *Never Let Me Go* is set in a time and place with which many reader will be familiar: England in the late 1990s. Even Hailsham, the school at which Kathy, Ruth and Tommy study and which Leona Toker and Daniel Chertoff point out “is a ‘sham’ which people ‘hail’” (165), is actually the name of a real British town. Thus the England of *Never Let Me Go*, unlike the Western Europe of *Brave New World*, shares more than just a name with the real life England; the two are nearly identical. By setting the novel in the recent past, Ishiguro invites us to fill in the gaps in his account of the setting with our own knowledge of late 20<sup>th</sup> century England. To use the terms set out by Marie-Laure Ryan, the novel cues readers to use (or rather, does not block readers' application of) the principle of minimal departure--a principle that enables interpreters to map what they know about their own world onto the world of a fictional narrative, unless that narrative indicates otherwise.

Yet as the novel progresses, we do learn of this England's one significant difference from our own: the existence of human cloning as an established practice. In this respect, the novel does block application of the principle of minimal departure, establishing a different sort of "accessibility relation" (Ryan 31) between the storyworld and the world of contemporary readers than can be found in other fictional genres.

Contrast, for example, a historical novel or roman à clef, where the principle of minimal departure holds across the board. Yet even this feature of the novel points to another way in which Ishiguro rewrites the standard relationship between the dystopian world and the real world. Canonical dystopian novels often feature a great deal of exposition on the front end in order to signal early how the world of the novel differs from the real world. *Brave New World*, for instance, opens in the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning

Centre, where the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning is giving a group of students a tour. This tour, complete with commentary from the Director, serves as an initiation for the reader into the world of the novel. The Director states that he will “begin at the beginning,” and he does, making sure the students (and the reader) understand the world before the narrative progresses. In *Never Let Me Go*, by contrast, there is no attempt at the outset to establish the differences between the world of the novel and the real world occupied by contemporary readers. Although, as Toker and Chertoff point out, the reader is introduced to certain “euphemistic neologisms” right from the start (164) – we are told about “donations” (= compulsory harvesting of organs) and “completions” (= death of clones from organ harvesting) all on the first page – the real weight of these terms is not explained until much later in the novel. Therefore, the reader may immediately sense that *something* is different about this world, but, not knowing exactly what that difference is, must continue to fill in the gaps of the narrative world with his or her experience of the real world.

Of course, the narrator of a dystopian novel also plays a significant role in the relationship between the dystopian world and the world of the reader, given that he or she provides our point of entry into the dystopian world. Dystopian narrators are typically heterodiegetic, offering an outside perspective on the dystopian world and the events that take place within it. This distant and unfamiliar perspective contributes to the disparity that the reader feels between the dystopian world and his or her own world. Again, Ishiguro rewrites this convention, opting for a homodiegetic narrator who also doubles as the novel’s protagonist; in other words, Ishiguro uses autodiegetic narration in the novel. The narrator, Kathy H., is a likeable character whose friendly, casual tone and

straightforward honesty – she admits at one point, “This was all a long time ago so I might have gotten some of it wrong” (Ishiguro 13) – have the effect of eliciting the reader’s sympathy. This sympathy, as Toker and Chertoff point out, “is further reinforced by the narrator’s direct address to the reader” (168). The reader’s relationship to the story, then, is not that of a passive observer, but an active participant who is emotionally invested in the story’s characters.

Beyond drawing out the reader’s sympathy, Kathy’s direct addresses to the reader affect the way in which the story is narrated. As previously mentioned, the novel does not begin with a great deal of exposition, or at least, not with an explanation of the storyworld itself. Instead, Kathy assumes that the reader is familiar with the world, and only explains the specifics of her own situation. She tells, for example, how “at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every day of the week” (Ishiguro 13) and how “our day at Hailsham always began with an assembly, which was usually pretty brief” (Ishiguro 42), all localized details of her own experiences. There is no explicit attempt to inform the reader about the world at large – Kathy assumes that her narratee already possesses that knowledge. Hence information that explains the differences between the dystopian world and the real world comes out gradually and indirectly. Indeed, as Toker and Chertoff as well as Shameem Black argue, the reader learns of the dystopian world’s significant deviation from our own world – the existence of cloning – and, subsequently, of the fate of the clones, in the same way that the clones themselves learn of it (Toker and Chertoff 178; Black 792). The reader is shocked, of course, as the clones themselves are, and it is this sense of shock that grants Ishiguro’s critique its immediacy. Unlike canonical dystopian novels such as *Brave New World* that

depict, in a relatively distanced way, what may eventually become of our society, *Never Let Me Go* provides a ground-level view of the disturbing social practices it targets, instilling in the reader the fear that perhaps such horrors already exist in our own world.

Shameem Black has eloquently argued that *Never Let Me Go* serves as a critique of our “globalizing economy [that] ask[s] us to recognize how many people in our own world are not considered fully human” (803), and Leona Toker and Daniel Chertoff have read the novel as a critique of modern day organ harvesting (178). But rather than identifying the specific institutions and practices critiqued in the novel, I wish to underscore here how the novel reworks the very conventions of the canonical dystopian novel--and in the process creates new possibilities for readerly engagement with the storyworlds such novels evoke. The world of *Never Let Me Go*, unlike the worlds of traditional dystopian fiction, is hauntingly familiar, and it is this familiarity that makes the shock of its dystopian elements that much more poignant. By using autodiegetic narration and direct addresses to the reader, and by only gradually indicating limitations on the principle of minimal departure, Ishiguro’s postmodern rewrite constitutes not a warning for the future, but a call to examine more closely the world of today.

Moraru’s concept of the postmodern rewrite provides a framework with which to analyze how in each of my three case studies, intertextuality functions in a way that is “deconstructive rather than constructive;” that is, all three texts are interested in critique rather than imitation (“Intertextuality” 261). However, in the process of bringing Moraru’s framework to bear on my case studies I have suggested strategies for expanding and enriching that framework. The multimodal nature of *Fun Home*, the shift from an epistemological to an ontological dominant in *Atonement*, and the subversion of classic

dystopian tropes in *Never Let Me Go* all suggest that Moraru's narrow definition of the postmodern rewrite—a text that rewrites a single text in an obvious way—must be extended to account for the ways in which contemporary experimental narratives use intertextuality in the service of an ideological critique, as well as fictional innovation.

## Chapter 2: Rereading and Reader Response

In our experience of narrative, we cannot, by definition, experience an entire narrative all at once. Narratives necessarily involve a timeline, and the reader is always located on a specific point on that timeline, moving forward through the narrative.

Wolfgang Iser refers to this phenomenon as the reader's "wandering viewpoint" (Iser cited in Calinescu 45), and Matei Calinescu builds on this concept, contending that both the reader's *anticipation* of where the narrative is headed and *memory* of where the narrative has already been are constantly changing (45).

These dual processes correspond to what Peter Rabinowitz and James Phelan call configuration and reconfiguration, respectively. In *Before Reading*, Rabinowitz frames these concepts in a discussion of the rules that readers bring to texts before they have even begun to read. On the one hand, Rabinowitz argues that thanks to *rules of configuration* readers of narratives "activate certain expectations" when "certain elements appear" (111). These rules of configuration govern the reader's anticipation of what is to come, what he or she expects to see, and how he or she reacts to those expectations being met or frustrated. James Phelan, on the other hand, discusses configuration and reconfiguration in terms of narrative progression, which he defines as "the synthesis of both the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through middle to end and the readerly dynamics... that both follow from and influence those textual dynamics" (3). Configuration, for its part, falls on the side of readerly dynamics, and Phelan describes it as "the authorial audience's hypothesis, implicit or explicit, about the direction and purpose of the whole narrative" (19). Further, as the reader moves along the timeline of the narrative, this hypothesis is constantly changing, and the reader



must revise his or her hypothesis about the direction of the narrative, as well as the purpose of what he or she has already read. This latter process of revision is what Phelan calls reconfiguration.

In both Phelan's and Rabinowitz's models, these processes are in large part responsible for the forward motion of the narrative; or rather, they are responsible for many of the emotional responses that the reader considers pleasurable as the experience of reading a narrative unfolds. If the reader's expectations are met, for example, the reader feels satisfaction, and if they are frustrated, the reader feels shock, and sometimes loss. Further, the process of waiting to see if his or her hypotheses are correct is responsible for the reader's sense of suspense. Such responses play an important role in readers' experience of a narrative, and in their overall aesthetic judgment of the narrative, as Phelan discusses in Chapter 6 of *Experiencing Fiction*.

As helpful as these models of configuration and reconfiguration are for analyzing responses to narrative, they only seem to account for a first reading. Clearly, a reader working through a novel for the second or third time would not rely on abstract, preconceived rules of configuration, since he or she would already know how the story ends, and thus would not have to make guesses about it. In turn, the effects arising from whether the reader's expectations are met or not--a very important part of the reader's experience according to Rabinowitz's model--would also disappear upon rereading. Phelan's model, too, assumes a first reading. The experience of a second-time reader of a work is not shaped by hypotheses about the direction of the narrative; the rereader knows his or her destination. And although rereading can involve further shifting hypotheses about the *purpose* of the narrative, Phelan suggests that reconfiguration ends with the

narrative's *completion*, the final step of its progression (21). That is, Phelan's model suggests that a reader has reached a conclusive reconfiguration of the narrative's purpose once he or she has finished the narrative.

Taking into account Calinescu's distinction between reading and rereading, this assumption of an initial reading in Phelan's and Rabinowitz's models of configuration and reconfiguration makes sense. For Calinescu, reading (i.e. first-time reading) is diachronic, while rereading is synchronic (19). That is, first-time reading is linear, bound by time, passive, *experiential*. Rereading, on the other hand, if not exactly spatial (Calinescu takes issue with the oft-used spatial metaphor), is circular, structural, and usually associated with "critical... and formal analysis" (Cornis-Pope 147). It follows, then, that Rabinowitz's and Phelan's models, which seek to emphasize the reader's experience of narratives, would assume a first reading.

The line between reading and rereading, however, is not always so clear, because "rereading and reading often go together" (Calinescu 19): there is really no such thing as a "virginal first reading" (Calinescu 41), and the "textual analysis" performed in rereading is actually "based on *reading* rather than on the objective structure of the text" (Barthes cited in Calinescu 52). In other words, rereading is not a repeated reading; it is a new act of reading that takes a prior reading of the same text as its starting point. Taking this claim a step further, I would like to suggest that rereading is an experience in its own right. Many readers revisit a favorite work time and time again not for the purposes of structural analysis, but because they find pleasure in rereading the work. But if the driving forces of configuration and reconfiguration are not at play in rereading, or at least

not in play in the same manner, what is it that governs the (reader's experience of) movement of the narrative? What is it that keeps the rereader's attention?

Although rereading does not involve the processes of configuration and reconfiguration in the same way that an initial reading does, it would not be accurate to say that these processes have no effect on the experience of rereading. Certainly, the reader does not need to make hypotheses about the direction of the narrative; nor must he or she constantly reconsider the purpose of what he or she has already read. Upon rereading, the reader has, at least to some degree, the totality of the work in mind. In this sense, one might argue that the rereader is simply applying what Rabinowitz calls *rules of coherence*, “rework[ing] its elements into a total pattern” (110). I would contend, however, that rereading differs from applying rules of coherence, because, as Rabinowitz stipulates, these rules are applied after reading is completed; that is, they are applied retrospectively. And although rereading is always in some way retrospective, it is simultaneously progressive, proceeding through the narrative in a linear fashion. This combination of retrospection and progression is what drives the experience of rereading. Rereading is characterized not by configuration and reconfiguration, but by the ghosts of those processes. The reader retraces his or her configuration and reconfiguration from his or her initial reading, but does so with knowledge of the entire narrative, and this generates new responses to the narrative. What is more, the capacity to generate new responses upon rereading – and the richness of structure presupposed by that capacity – is what makes the rereading of certain texts especially productive.

### **Preparations**

Depending on the narrative at issue, for many readers the ending will be the most memorable part of the text. This is not only because it is, chronologically, the last thing the reader reads, but also because the ending is in what Rabinowitz calls a “privileged position” (58). According to Rabinowitz, a reader applies certain *rules of notice* to a text, and these rules dictate which parts of a narrative most affect the reader’s *concentration* and *scaffolding*; that is, rules of notice determine which parts of the text the reader pays the greatest attention to, and which parts the reader will base his or her interpretation of the unfolding story on (53). One of these rules deals with privileged positions. Endings occupy such a position because they both capture readers’ attention and influence their interpretation of the overall narrative. Because endings play such a significant role in first readings, they are also quite important in rereading, although in a different way. Rabinowitz hints at this idea in *Before Reading*, but does not expand on it: “Last sentences, of course, cannot serve to focus a reading experience (at least, not an initial reading experience)” (62). Last sentences, and endings more generally, *do* focus the experience of rereading, however; they provide the lens through which the reader views his or her remembered configuration and reconfiguration, and in turn, they generate new responses to the narrative.

Certain kinds of endings, of course, alter the act of rereading more than others. Endings that most drastically shape the experience of rereading contain the element of surprise, such as the ending of *Atonement*. More than any other type of ending, surprise endings ask the reader to reconfigure his or her understanding of the entire narrative--sometimes in quite drastic ways. As Phelan points out, however, to be maximally effective, or impact the reading experience most extensively, a surprise ending must be

prepared for, so that “the audience can recognize that the necessary reconfiguration caused by the surprise actually fits well with the beginning and the middle of the progression” (95). Upon rereading, these preparations continue to shape – but in a somewhat different way – the reader’s experience of the narrative. As the reader retraces his or her configuration and reconfiguration of the narrative, he or she is put into dialogue with his or her first-time-reading self, looking for preparatory moments that he or she missed upon first reading the text.

### *Atonement*

Consider how these sorts of processes might unfold in a rereading of *Atonement*. After reading three sections of what seems to be a straightforward narrative, the reader discovers “London, 1999,” an entry in Briony’s diary. The entry reveals not only that the entire novel up to this point has been a narrative of Briony’s own creation, but also that the ending of that novel – the part about Robbie and Cecilia’s reunion, and Briony’s promise to recant her testimony – has been a fabrication, or a fabrication within the overall fictional world evoked by McEwan’s text. Robbie and Cecilia, the reader learns, both perished in the war. This revelation clearly has numerous consequences for the reader’s initial experience of the narrative, consequences that Phelan explores in detail in Chapter 5 of *Experiencing Fiction*. Phelan discusses the novel’s ending in terms of judgments – those of the reader, those of the characters, and even those of McEwan himself. He is ultimately concerned with the reader’s formal, ethical, and aesthetic judgments of “McEwan and his novel, especially his springing so much on us so suddenly” (Phelan 110). In order to address these issues, Phelan analyzes the progression of the first three sections of the novel in light of the ending.

Readers do much the same thing in their rereading – they revisit a short story or novel with the totality of the narrative in mind. In addition to making ethical and aesthetic judgments about the narrative, however, the reader also judges his or her own initial reading, especially the configurations and reconfigurations it entailed, against his or her subsequent rereading. *Atonement* and its surprise ending make this process especially productive, because the text contains both preparations for the ending and what I propose to call *amplifiers*, moments that actually amplify the reconfiguration-causing effect of the ending.

Phelan identifies some of the preparations that have this kind of amplificatory function in *Atonement*. Specifically, he points to Robbie's promise to be silent at the end of Part Two, and to Briony's walk to Cecilia's apartment in Part Three, in which Briony describes how she felt a ghostly version of herself break off and walk back to the hospital (Phelan 129). Many of the other preparations in *Atonement* are located in Briony's discussion of her writing. In Chapter 3, for instance, Briony – that is, the narrating Briony – describes the young Briony's plans for writing about the scene by the fountain: "She could begin now, setting it down as she had seen it... Then the scene could be recast, through Cecilia's eyes, and then Robbie's" (McEwan 52). While in the initial reading this serves only as a marker of young Briony's sudden interest in psychological realism, the careful rereader realizes that young Briony's plan for her story corresponds almost exactly to what Briony has just narrated. In another instance, a small detail on the level of imagery – Briony's description of the "the long grass... already stalked by the leonine yellow of high summer" (McEwan 48) – shows up again in Cyril Connolly's rejection letter to young Briony, in which he notes his fondness of that particular image

(McEwan 402). While it is unlikely that a first-time reader of the novel would have predicted the ending on the basis of this small detail, the repetition sticks out upon rereading, making the novel's ending--its revelation that Briony herself is the author of the prior sections of the texts--seem all the more inevitable. Indeed, part of what makes a rereading of *Atonement* so productive--so rich with new inferences and new forms of connection-making--is the degree to which that rereading is likely to be at odds with the reader's initial configuration and reconfiguration. Whereas the reader's initial hypotheses about the direction of the narrative and ultimate reconfiguration of his or her understanding of the novel's purpose emphasize the reconfiguration-causing effect of the novel's ending, the process of rereading foregrounds the inevitability of the novel's ending. In effect, the same text produces entirely different responses depending on whether it is being read or reread.

Paradoxically, the rich experience of rereading *Atonement* is also due in large part to the way a rereading of the novel amplifies the reconfiguration-causing effect of the novel's surprise ending. The moments that I would group under the heading of "amplifiers," while having little effect on the configuration and reconfiguration of an initial reading, serve to further complicate the ontological questions foregrounded by the novel's ending. In one such instance, Briony says: "In later years she regretted not being more factual, not providing herself with a store of raw material. It would have been useful to know what happened, what it looked like, who was there, what was said" (McEwan 360). In an initial reading, this passage merely describes an understandable and innocent desire that many people have: to have a more reliable account of their youth than that afforded by their own fading memories. Upon rereading, however, the reader

understands that Briony is communicating her own desire, and implicit in this desire is the fact that Briony does not remember her days at the hospital, despite giving the reader a full account of them, complete with detail and dialogue. Her letter from Cyril Connolly has a similar effect. In the letter, Connolly offers a series of suggestions to Briony to improve “Two Figures by a Fountain,” the story that is ultimately revealed to be the first draft of Briony’s novel. In her final draft – that is, the one the reader has access to – Briony has incorporated nearly all of Connolly’s suggestions. The effect of such moments is to amplify what might be called the story-eroding force of Briony’s final revelation, as the rereader keeps applying, throughout the text, his or her knowledge of Briony’s unreliability as a narrator. Yet far from undermining the narrative or diminishing its status as an aesthetic achievement, these amplificatory effects contribute importantly to “the novel’s theme of the relation between art and experience” (Phelan 129).

### *Never Let Me Go*

The preparations in *Atonement* play an important role in the reader’s experience and enjoyment of rereading the novel. Preparations do not always function in this way, however, even in novels with similar surprises. Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, for instance, hinges on a jarring revelation, albeit one that occurs halfway through the novel: Kathy and her fellow Hailsham students, the reader learns, are clones. Unlike *Atonement*, however, the revelation is not sudden, but gradual. In fact, the first-time reader’s experience of this revelation is “parallel to the experience of the novel’s characters” (Toker and Chertoff 163). The reader’s acts of configuration and reconfiguration, then, are also parallel to those of the characters. The characters, initially unaware of their



situation, are forced to hazard guesses about it. For instance, many of the conversations between Kathy and Tommy in part one revolve around their respective guesses about the purpose of their artwork. The reader, also in the dark about the artwork's purpose, is led to make similar hypotheses. In this way, the novel explicitly guides the reader's acts of configuration.

More important for the process of rereading is the way in which the novel, having already been read (at least) once, guides the reader's reconfiguration in subsequent readings. Like the characters themselves, the reader has been "told and not told" about the reality of the clones' situation (Ishiguro 81). By the time the reader learns that the characters are clones, he or she has already been exposed to the terminology of the storyworld - terms such as "donors" and "completing" - as well as other signals that point to the disparity between the storyworld and the reader's own world. These preparations for the novel's surprise revelation differ from those in *Atonement* in that they are explicitly marked as preparations. In other words, the first time the reader reads the word "complete" in the context of the novel, he or she expects that he or she is being prepared for some sort of revelation, some deviation from the principle of minimal departure. Like the characters, then, the reader's sense of shock at the revelation is somewhat dulled, or in Kathy's words, "It *was* like we'd heard everything somewhere before" (Ishiguro 83, emphasis in original). To put the same point another way, the reader feels the inevitability of the revelation not only upon rereading, but also in the initial reading itself.

The configuration and reconfiguration the reader must make in *Never Let Me Go* thus leads to a different sort of rereading experience than that associated with a rereading of *Atonement*. The surprise ending of *Atonement* is so jarring and unexpected, and the

preparations for that ending so carefully hidden from the first-time reader, that the rereader is in a sense spurred on to seek out such preparations in order to correct his or her initial configuration. The rereader of *Atonement* is also in a state of prolonged reconfiguration, as certain moments in the text amplify the extent of the reconfiguration the reader must make in order to account for the novel's ending. Hence a rereading of *Atonement* is largely shaped by its surprise ending. With *Never Let Me Go*, by contrast, it is the *initial* reading that is shaped by the surprise – the first-time reader sees the surprise coming, and looks for preparations in the text as to what that surprise might be or involve. Upon rereading, these preparations lose some of their weight, and the rereader focuses his or attention on other dimensions of the text--for example, why the cloned students never resisted the social or institutional structures that predetermined their fate.

### *Fun Home*

As I hope to have shown in my analysis of *Atonement* and *Never Let Me Go*, the process of rereading often puts the rereader in dialogue with his or her first-time-reading self. This is especially the case in narratives with surprise endings, in which the rereader looks for moments in the text that should have prepared him or her for the surprise in his or her initial reading. Phelan, despite not explicitly commenting on the role such preparations play in shaping the process of rereading, sees them as necessary for a surprise ending to be effective, in that they indicate to the reader how the surprise ending actually fits with the beginning and middle of the narrative (95). In a way that calls into question the very idea of "preparation," however, Bechdel's *Fun Home* builds the process of rereading into a first-time reading. Bechdel achieves this effect through the cyclical temporal structure of the narrative, drawing in turn on techniques afforded by the

graphic-narrative medium to flesh out this cyclical structure. In Bechdel's text, part of what is being prepared for is a process of continuing to return to--in order to reassess the significance of--earlier moments in time. Those moments can therefore no longer be viewed as merely preparatory.

Whereas *Atonement* and *Never Let Me Go* are, for the most part, linear narratives, the temporality of *Fun Home* is more circular in nature. Many critics have focused on different aspects of the text's recursive structure; Julia Watson, for instance, argues that the text's "to-and-fro movement" reflects its thematic concern with "transversals... and inversions" (37), while David Herman focuses on how the text "exploits the resources of graphic narrative to suggest that it is not always possible to know exactly where in time one's own experiences, inferences, or affective responses should be located" (206). I contend that another significant aspect of the recursive temporality of *Fun Home*, a text so concerned with literature itself, is the way in which it foregrounds and thematizes the process of rereading. As I have previously described, the process of rereading involves revisiting a text equipped with knowledge that was not available in a first-time reading. But in *Fun Home*, Bechdel frequently revisits aspects of her own narrative, offering a new interpretation or, in some cases, entirely new information with each successive pass over the narrated or rather re-narrated events. The moment of Bruce Bechdel's death, for instance, is narrated three separate times. In each case, Bechdel offers a new perspective on the situation: in the first instance, Bechdel assures the reader that she does not think her father's death was an accident (28); in the second instance, Bechdel hypothesizes that the truck may have "passed without incident" if she had not come out to her parents (59); in the third instance, Bechdel has come to terms with her father's "hurtling into the sea,"

understanding that “he was there to catch me when I leapt” (232). Like the process of rereading, Bechdel’s process of revisiting moments of her life uncovers in these moments a newfound significance. Bechdel’s narration suggests that, thanks to details about these moments made available through the act of narrative revisitation itself, the moments in question constituted turning points in her life story.

The multimodal nature of the graphic-narrative medium allows Bechdel to foreground this process of revisitation. Specifically, the use of repeated panels in the visual track allows the text to explicitly signal a return to an earlier moment in the narrative, while the verbal track containing the older Bechdel’s narration— or, in some cases, speech balloons superimposed on top of narrated events represented in the visual track – allow Bechdel to share new information or to view the moment from a new perspective. For instance, Alison’s telephone conversation with her mother, in which she learns of her father’s homosexuality, is repeated three times throughout the narrative. In each of the three instances, Alison is depicted lying on the floor with a flabbergasted expression, clutching the telephone in her hand. In the first occurrence, the revelation is limited; Alison’s mother only tells her about her father’s affairs with other men (Bechdel 58-59). In the second instance, however, Alison is depicted as saying: “Roy, our babysitter?!”--indicating that Bruce has also had affairs with underage boys (Bechdel 79). Interestingly, Bechdel here describes the moment as an “abrupt and wholesale revision of my history” (79). This moment not only revises the young Alison’s history, but also revises Bechdel’s *account* of that history, given that her initial narration of this moment did not include any information about Bruce’s affair with Roy. In using the visual track to signal a return to an earlier event, a speech balloon corresponding to an utterance

within the storyworld to convey a new aspect of the situation, and the narration included in a text box at the top of the panel to highlight and comment on this process of revision and revisitation, Bechdel uses word-image combinations to thematize the process of rereading itself.

Because Bechdel's use of recursive temporality and word-image combinations builds the process of rereading into a first-time reading of *Fun Home*, the experience of *actually* rereading the text is more continuous with the process of initially reading the narrative than is the case with *Atonement* and *Never Let Me Go*. By the time the reader has finished *Fun Home* for the first time, he or she has already revisited many moments of the narrative several times in different contexts, and a rereading of the text feels like a continuation of this process of revisitation rather than a restart. Phelan's notion that surprises in a narrative must be prepared for – a notion that was developed on the basis of linear, monomodal print texts – does not seem to apply to a text with this sort of recursive structure. In a linear narrative, the reader revisits the earlier parts of the text to see how the surprise fits, while the jarring moments in *Fun Home*, though occurring toward the end of the time span covered by Bechdel's narration, are revisited at several points throughout the narrative.

### **Rereader/narrator relationship**

According to Phelan, “narrativity involves the interaction of two kinds of change: that experienced by the characters and that experienced by the audience in its developing responses to the characters' changes” (7). Phelan is quick to point out that the reader not only responds to the characters and their actions, but also makes judgments of “the ethics of storytelling itself” (12). It is not only the reader's relationship to characters and events

that affects his or her experience of narrative, but also the reader's relationship to the narrator. However, despite its emphasis on textual and readerly *dynamics* – that is, the changes, both in the text and the reader, that move the narrative forward – Phelan's model does not account for how the reader's judgments of the narrator change upon rereading. For each of my three case studies, the process of rereading invites the reader to reconfigure his or her judgments of the narrator. In the case of *Atonement*, the rereader must make an entirely new set of judgments, as the narrator does not even become fully present (or fully known) until rereading. In *Never Let Me Go*, the process of rereading creates a critical distance between the reader and the narrator, who, upon first reading, appears to be a highly sympathetic character. Finally, *Fun Home* makes use of intertextuality to encourage rereading, which leads the rereader to make a positive ethical judgment of Bechdel as storyteller.

The process of rereading *Atonement* does not merely involve a reconfiguration of the reader's judgments of the narrator, but actually constructs a narrating-I who was not present upon the first-time reading. In an initial reading of the novel, the narration does not even appear to be homodiegetic. Indeed, up until "London, 1999," the reader experiences the novel as a typical heterodiegetic narrative, the narration of which is focalized through a variety of characters. For the most part, the narrator remains invisible to the first-time reader, making a negligible impact on both the reader's temporal experience of and attitude toward the narrated events. That is, the reader experiences the events more or less as the characters experience them, and does not feel that an external perspective is guiding any of his or her judgments.

Even in the rare instances in which the narrator pulls back from the perspective of the characters to offer a glimpse into their future thoughts, the first-time reader experiences these moments as a routine shift in focalization, rather than representative of the views of some external perspective. It is not until a rereading of the novel, when the reader is finally aware that the narration is Briony's own, that these moments have a profound impact on the reader's judgments. In one instance the narrator says, "In later years she regretted not being more factual, not providing herself with a store of raw material" (McEwan 360). In addition to amplifying the rereader's reconfiguration, as I discussed in the previous section, this passage also has consequences for the rereader's judgments of the narrator. In a first-time reading, this statement invites a benign interpretive judgment of the older Briony – she longs for an accurate recollection of the past – and furthermore, the judgment is of the older Briony only as she functions as a character, as another consciousness through which the narration is briefly focalized. In a rereading of the novel, however, the judgment induced by this statement becomes simultaneously more incriminating and more significant for the reader's experience of the narrative. If Briony is narrating the events in the novel, yet also longs for a more accurate recollection of those events, then her narration must be, to a large extent, unreliable, which leads the rereader not only to arrive at a different, more negative assessment of Briony as a narrator, but also to doubt the veracity of the entire narrative.

In a similar moment, the focalization shifts away from young Briony to a much older Briony, and reveals Briony's retrospective thoughts on her growth as a writer:

Six decades later she would describe how at the age of thirteen she had written her way through a whole history of literature... She would be well

aware of the extent of her self-mythologizing, and she gave her account a self-mocking, or mock-heroic tone... She knew that it was not correct to refer to her dramas in the plural, that her mockery distanced her from the earnest, reflective child, and that it was not the long-ago morning she was recalling so much as her subsequent accounts of it. (McEwan 52)

Again, for a first-time reader, this passage marks only a shift in focalization. This shift to the perspective of a future Briony may strike the reader as *paraleptic* – that is, “giving more [information] than is authorized in principle in the code of focalization governing the whole” (Genette, “Narrative Discourse” 195). In other words, the reader may be inclined to interpret the perspective shift as a shift to an external source of information about the storyworld--a source not appealed to up to this point in the narrative. Unaware that Briony is responsible for the shift, the reader has no basis for making a judgment about her in connection with the mode of narration being used. If anything, the first-time reader might negatively judge the work itself, seeing this shift to the future as a break from the pattern that McEwan had previously established. The first-time reader might also make a judgment of the older Briony as character, noting that even six decades later she is unable to escape her habit of romanticizing; but in this case, the reader’s judgments of Briony’s hypothetical conception of her thirteen-year-old self do not affect the reader’s judgments of the narration.

In a rereading of the novel, by contrast, this passage has a direct impact on the reader’s judgments of the narrating Briony, and thus of her narration. Unlike a first-time reader, the rereader knows that the perspective found in this passage represents the older Briony's vantage point on events. This passage, then, emphasizes to the rereader the



narration's status as a retrospective--and, crucially, homodiegetic--account. Furthermore, the rereader realizes that the passage explicitly comments on the extent to which Briony's retrospective account has been mediated through the perspective afforded by later circumstances and events. The passage thus simultaneously invites the rereader to share in the perspective of the older, narrating Briony and to judge that perspective, and consequently the narration, as unreliable.

The role of the older, narrating Kathy in *Never Let Me Go*, unlike the narrating version of Briony in *Atonement*, is not hidden from the first-time reader. In fact, the first-time reader may feel a particular affinity with Kathy, since the structure of the narration requires the reader to make sense of the events in parallel with Kathy's attempts to make sense of them. Upon rereading, however, the reader applies his or her knowledge of the narrative as a whole to Kathy's narration, and this vantage point invites an entirely different set of judgments than those likely to be made by the first-time reader. The first-time reader is likely to feel positively disposed to the honesty--or humility--of Kathy's narration. Kathy qualifies many details of her account with words and phrases such as "maybe," "probably," and "I suppose." At times, she's even more explicit, such as when she says, "Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong" (Ishiguro 8). This carefulness on Kathy's part invites the first-time reader to trust her, because, unlike Briony in *Atonement*, Kathy is up front with the reader about her imperfect memory and about the effects that memory may have on her account.

Furthermore, the first-time reader can only come to know the storyworld through Kathy's own attempts to make sense of it. As I have previously suggested, details of the storyworld are not provided at the outset, but are only revealed incrementally, so that the

reader must rely on Kathy's judgments about her world in order to formulate his or her own judgments. For instance, when Kathy says, early on in the novel, "That was when I first understood, really understood, just how lucky we'd been – Tommy, Ruth, me, all the rest of us" (Ishiguro 6), the first-time reader takes it for granted that this claim is true, as he or she does not yet have further information about the storyworld against which to test it.

Upon rereading, however, the reader no longer relies solely on Kathy's judgments in his or her evaluation of the storyworld or of Kathy herself. Having already finished the narrative, the rereader now has knowledge of the rules governing the clones inhabiting the storyworld, as disclosed in Kathy's interview with Miss Emily, as well as knowledge of Kathy's ultimate understanding of her world and her place in it. In revisiting the narrative, the rereader applies this knowledge to Kathy's narration, and this process leads the rereader to make critical judgments of Kathy's passivity. Unlike in *Atonement*, however, these negative judgments are not directed toward the narrator herself, but instead toward the dominant ideology that is responsible for her passivity. One moment that draws such judgments from the rereader comes when Madame catches Kathy dancing to the song "Never Let Me Go." As Toker and Chertoff point out, "Kathy seems to repress a possible meaning that strongly suggests itself to the reader: the song's refrain enhances the irony of Hailsham students' *not wanting* to be released" (167, emphasis in original). What Toker and Chertoff fail to point out, however, is that such a meaning does not suggest itself until rereading; only the rereader, knowing that Kathy never makes an attempt to escape her fate, is able to make this connection.

Indeed, the rereader, applying the knowledge disclosed in Kathy's interview with Miss Emily, may come to question many of Kathy's interpretations. In the interview, Miss Emily tells Kathy that the purpose of Hailsham was to convince the public of the clones' inherent worth, a project that ultimately failed (Ishiguro 260-262). She goes on to say that if the clones hadn't been sheltered from that reality, "You would have told us it was all pointless, and how could we have argued with you?" (Ishiguro 268). Upon rereading, the reader understands that Kathy has used this information in concluding how "lucky we'd been" (Ishiguro 6). Of course, Kathy's sense of being lucky also serves as a reflection on the fact that the clones at Hailsham had it better than clones elsewhere. Still, Kathy's accepting this fact as justification for acquiescing to her own situation suggests to the reader the strength of the dominant ideology, an ideology that permeates even those like Miss Emily who claim to have the clones' best interest in mind. In this way, moments in *Never Let Me Go* that engender sympathy in the first-time reader lead the rereader to look critically on Kathy's passivity, which in turn strengthens Ishiguro's ideological critique of the institutions and practices represented in the storyworld.

While *Atonement* and *Never Let Me Go* elicit a critical stance toward or distrust of their respective narrators, a rereading of *Fun Home* only strengthens the reader's sense of trust in Bechdel as narrator and guide. In a first-time reading, Bechdel establishes this close relationship with the reader. As Julia Watson points out, the very medium of the graphic memoir is especially suited to creating such a relationship: "The way we read cartoons, as a pleasurable alternative to high seriousness... affords occasions for reader identification with characters and situations that solicit our autobiographical intimacy" (29). Despite creating a pleasurable reading experience, Bechdel expects much from her

readers; she “calls upon readers to be literate in many kinds of texts... as a sophisticated and politically impassioned community” (Watson 29). This expectation encourages readers to revisit the memoir as their literacy grows, and this process in turn fosters, via rereading of the text, increasingly positive judgments of Bechdel as a storyteller.

Unlike *Atonement*, a rereading of which is unique precisely because of what the novel hides from the first-time reader, *Fun Home* does not hide its depth in a surprise revelation. Instead, *Fun Home* creates layers meaning through a vast network of intertextual references – from James Joyce and Marcel Proust to Kate Millett and *The Wind in the Willows* – all of which are present even to the first-time reader. The structure of *Fun Home*, then, allows for a richer and more complex interpretation with each subsequent reading, without diminishing the experience of the first-time reading. For instance, the inclusion of a copy of *Anna Karenina* in the illustration of Alison playing a game of “airplane” with her father (Bechdel 3) can certainly be read as “foreshadow[ing] her father’s later suicide” (Freedman 131), but that realization is certainly not integral to the first-time reader’s experience of the narrative. However, the subtle allusion to that text encourages the reader who is not familiar with Tolstoy to revisit *Fun Home* after broadening his or her literary knowledge. Indeed, the graphic medium allows such allusions to be non-intrusive enough not to disrupt the experience of reading, but present enough to encourage the reader to explore the intertext. Thus, Bechdel sometimes alludes to other works by including images of novel covers in individual panels.

Even the more extensive allusions are structured in such a way that they encourage, but do not require, the reader’s prior knowledge of the intertext--and thus function as a spur for rereading once the reader has familiarized himself or herself with

the text at issue. Bechdel's allusions to both Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses* in the final chapter, for instance, are supplemental but not essential to the reader's understanding of the narrative. In recounting how she and her father would never discuss their "shared predilection" again after their visit to the movie theater, Bechdel uses the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses* to frame her account: "We had our Ithaca moment" (222). In context, even the reader who is unfamiliar with Homer or Joyce is able to gather that this moment between Alison and her father is of profound significance to her. However, the way in which "the Homeric and Joycean language of *Odyssey*... becomes the very language of her sexual and literary awakening" (Freedman 136) also suggests to the reader that these intertexts themselves are of profound significance to Bechdel, and that they are useful in analyzing Bechdel's own narrative. Indeed, Bechdel even places the statement "We had our Ithaca moment" in a text box on top of an illustration of a passage from the "Ithaca" chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which provides the reader with a preview of the intertext. In this way, Bechdel's extensive use of intertextuality invites the reader to trace out the network of allusions included in the text, and then to revisit her own narrative with this expanded literary background.

As Phelan argues in *Experiencing Fiction*, "if we find the values underlying our ethical judgments of characters or narrators to be deficient but nevertheless deployed with great skill, we will judge the aesthetics of the narrative more highly than its ethics" (14). But the process of rereading complicates matters. In texts like *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement*, the first-time reader may make a positive ethical judgment of the text and of its author, whereas a rereading of that text will reveal the narrator to be ethically deficient, or at least ethically questionable. In *Fun Home*, by contrast, the reader's

aesthetic judgment of the text's rereadability and his or her ethical judgment of Bechdel as narrator are closely related. Because *Fun Home*'s extensive use of intertextuality encourages subsequent readings, the rereader makes a positive ethical judgment of Bechdel as his or her guide through the narrative.

According to Phelan and Rabinowitz, the process of reading narrative is one that is bound up in time. As the term "narrative progression" suggests, the reader's configuration and reconfiguration are volatile, changing frequently as he or she advances through the narrative. What Phelan and Rabinowitz fail to consider, however, is that the process of rereading is an extension of this narrative progression. As I hope to have shown in my discussion of preparations and of judgments of narrators in each of my three case studies, the reader's understanding of and reaction to a narrative continues to change during the process of rereading. The issue of rereading is one that has largely been neglected in the field of narrative theory, and its implications for other aspects of narrative still need to be explored.

### Chapter 3: Fictional and Factual Worlds

In the wake of the attempts of postmodernism and poststructuralism to erase the boundary between fictional discourse and historical discourse, some scholars have found it beneficial to reassert the importance of such a boundary. Among these scholars are Dorrit Cohn—who defines fiction as nonreferential narrative—and Marie-Laure Ryan and Lubomír Doležel, both of whom define fiction in terms of possible-worlds semantics. In formulating a method of distinguishing between factual and fictional narrative, each of these scholars has addressed areas of overlap where the distinction becomes unclear. While the work of these scholars helps to illuminate issues of fictionality in my case studies, I argue that each of my case studies presents a unique area of overlap that these existing frameworks do not account for—*Fun Home* through its use of fictional analogues for real-world individuals; *Atonement* through the process I have termed “embedded recentering,” where readers must take account of fictional narratives *within* the fictional storyworld; and *Never Let Me Go* through its use of counterfactual history, or the mapping out of events that did not in fact occur but might have.

#### *Fun Home*

In her discussion of the crucial distinction between first-person and third-person life writing, Dorrit Cohn acknowledges that these two “regimes of person” overlap in what she calls “witness biographies,” or “a special type of historical biography that has a strong component of autobiography” (29). Bechdel’s *Fun Home* exists in a similarly liminal space, although it may be more accurately classified as an *autobiography* that has a strong component of *biography*. Julia Watson has noted the work’s multiple biographical interests, describing the narrative as “split between a solo story, Bechdel’s

child narrator Alison's development of an 'I,' and the domestic ethnography of the family" (30). Although the Bechdel family unit is certainly a focal point of the memoir, I contend that the memoir's structure, as well as many of its literary allusions – specifically Joyce's *Ulysses* and, as Watson herself points out, the Icarus-Daedalus myth (30) – invite us to read the text especially as the story of Alison and her father, Bruce Bechdel.

Additionally, such intertexts serve as Bechdel's primary tool for describing her father as well as for modeling the complex dynamic of their relationship. These aspects of *Fun Home* pose a challenge for Cohn's distinction between fictional and factual life writing; for Cohn, the border between third-person fiction and factual biography is crossed only when biography attempts to mimic the ability of fiction to "convey... the intimate subjective experiences of its characters" (24). *Fun Home*, however, challenges the distinction by using fictional analogues as a means of narrating a factual life story.

Although all autobiographies must obviously feature characters other than the "I" who is the author and the primary subject of the work, Bechdel presents *Fun Home* as a story that is as much about her father as it is about herself, as much "witness biography" as it is autobiography. If, as Peter Rabinowitz argues, the beginning and ending of a narrative are "privileged positions" that warrant the reader's careful attention (58), then it is telling that the first and last panels of *Fun Home* are illustrations of Alison and Bruce interacting (Bechdel 3, 232). Indeed, the very first sentence of the narration makes Bruce, not Alison, its primary subject: "Like many fathers, mine could occasionally be prevailed on for a spot of 'airplane'" (Bechdel 3). In addition to structuring her narrative around her father, Bechdel also frequently defines herself in relation to him. For example, one page features four panels in which Alison and her father are presented in



terms of four different binary oppositions: “I was Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his Aesthete” (Bechdel 15). Bechdel also defines her sexuality in relation to her father’s, as Watson points out: “Bechdel makes her father’s story of private shame, ‘perversion,’ and early violent death into a happier story that enabled her own embrace of sexuality as their shared ‘erotic truth’” (48). Finally, Bechdel foregrounds her relationship with her father by mapping that relationship onto fictional models of parent/offspring relationships, such as that between Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus from *Ulysses* and between Icarus and Daedalus from Greek mythology.

In *Fun Home*, these fictional models act “not only as descriptive devices” as Bechdel herself calls them (67), but also as heuristic devices; in other words, Bechdel relies on the reader’s prior understanding of certain fictional characters and relationships in order to develop his or her understanding of the characters and relationships in her own narrative. In the first scene, for example, in which Alison and her father are playing “airplane,” she describes their relationship as a “reenactment of this mythic relationship [between Icarus and Daedalus]” (Bechdel 4). Although she often complicates the mapping of her relationships onto fictional models – her father, for instance, is at once Daedalus *and* Icarus, both a “skillful artificer” and the one “who was to plummet from the sky” (Bechdel 4) – she still uses these models as frames of reference for her reader’s understanding of those involved in her own life story, especially her father. In this particular example, Bechdel’s allusion works to characterize Bruce Bechdel as simultaneously obsessed with his craft and fated to fail. In a similar instance, Bechdel compares her and father to “fatherless Stephen and sonless Bloom having their equivocal

late-night cocoa at 7 Eccles Street” (221). Here, the allusion to *Ulysses* expresses the void Alison feels in her relationship with her father, while at the same time implying that Bruce himself felt a similar void.

Bechdel makes clear throughout the narrative that her use of fictional analogues to describe her father is necessary because he thought of himself in fictional terms. At times, these claims are themselves couched within literary allusions: “But in a way *Gatsby*’s pristine books and my father’s worn ones signify the same thing—the preference of a fiction to reality” (Bechdel 85). Bechdel even provides evidence for these claims, pointing to a series of letters Bruce wrote Helen before they were married. In the letters, Bruce explains how he “tore through Fitzgerald’s stories, seeing himself in various characters” (Bechdel 63). In another instance, Bechdel forgoes specific literary references to comment on her father in more general terms: “[H]owever convincing they might be, you can’t lay hands on a fictional character” (84). In its immediate context, this comment seems critical of Bruce’s affectation of a fictional persona, which manifests itself not only in his library but also in the role-playing entailed by his hidden sexuality. However, Bechdel’s assertion that “my parents are most real to me in fictional terms” suggests that an accurate depiction of her father cannot be uncoupled from the realm of fiction.

Bechdel’s practice of fleshing out a factual (auto)biography via fictional characters constitutes a sort of gray area between factual and fictional life writing that Cohn does not account for. For Cohn, third-person fiction is set apart from factual biography by its ability to enter the inner workings of its characters’ minds (24). Factual biography, Cohn acknowledges, is obviously interested in the mental states of its subject,

as well, but in attempting to express that interest, it must employ techniques different from those used in third-person fiction (26). The most prevalent of these techniques is what Cohn calls *psycho-narration*, which is “a technique where the narrator’s voice is clearly set off from the language that runs through the subject’s head” (26). As Cohn points out, this technique, also known as indirect discourse, is most commonly marked by “conjectural and inferential syntax”--that is, by the use of qualifiers such as “perhaps” and “must have” (27). Factual texts that blur the boundary between fictional and factual life writing are those that eschew techniques like psycho-narration, opting instead to enter into the minds of actual persons using techniques typically reserved for fictional texts; the genre of New Journalism occupies such a gray area (Cohn 28).

Bechdel’s challenge to Cohn’s distinction does not lie in her depiction of Bruce’s mental states; in fact, when Bechdel attempts to capture her father’s inner life, her narration features the sort of hedges that Cohn associates with psycho-narration. In one instance, Bechdel hypothesizes about Bruce’s thought process upon meeting her mother, Helen. Invoking a potential parallel between Bruce and the narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Bechdel writes: “Had he somehow conflated her with her address, like Proust’s narrator had with Gilberte and the garden?” (105). Here, Bechdel puts the comparison in the form of a question, thereby marking it off as her own hypothesis instead of a claim to fact. But Bechdel does challenge Cohn’s distinction by asserting the validity of fictional analogues as a way of narrating a factual life story. According to Bechdel, her father’s story cannot be told without the use of fictional references. Cohn’s clear-cut distinction between third-person fiction and factual biography does not account

for the blending of fictional and factual discourse that occurs in *Fun Home*, let alone the usefulness of such a blending.

By conveying her father's and her own life stories through fictional analogues, Bechdel questions the usefulness of a hard and fast distinction between factuality and fictionality—suggesting how people sometimes orient themselves, in their everyday lives, around fictional characters, situations, and events. In this way *Fun Home* suggests a paradox: that in the case of someone like Bruce Bechdel, who thought of himself largely in fictional terms, transgressing the line between factual and fictional genres of narrative is perhaps the only legitimate means of writing an accurate life story.

### ***Atonement***

As Cohn's discussion in *The Distinction of Fiction* suggests, the salience of the distinction between factual and fictional narratives is reinforced by texts that play with this boundary. The revelation that a supposedly autobiographical work is actually a work of fiction often incites uproar among readers, who feel slighted by the deceptive classification. Perhaps the best explanation of this phenomenon comes from Philippe Lejeune, who characterizes the experiences of reading autobiography and of reading fiction in terms of two very different pacts entered into by the reader and the author (14). According to Lejeune, autobiography must make clear to the reader its status as autobiography either through an explicit statement to that effect or by establishing identity (e.g., through naming) among the author, narrator, and protagonist of the autobiographical account. Fiction, on the other hand, affirms its fictionality either through explicit signals (such as use of the term “novel” on the cover or signposts that include attributions of extended stretches of thought to characters in third-person or

heterodiegetic narratives) or through the *nonidentity* of author, narrator, and protagonist. The presence of the autobiographical or fictional pact “determines the attitude of the reader” (Lejeune 14) and explains why readers feel that they have wasted their time if they have assumed that an autobiographical pact was in place when it was not—and also why readers who assumed they were reading a fictional narrative would need to recalibrate their interpretation if it came to light that the narrative were in fact autobiographical.

Analogously, readers of *Atonement* feel slighted by the revelation that Briony—a fictional character whom the text reveals to be the narrator of her own and others' life stories—has fabricated many parts of her narrative. In a review for the *Weekly Standard*, for example, Margaret Boerner says: “In a kind of lunacy that one supposes he imagined was like Ionesco’s absurdity, McEwan destroys the structure he has set up and tells us it was all fiction” (43). The difference, of course, is that *Atonement* is clearly marked as a work of fiction; thus its readers are upset not because the events narrated in the novel did not take place in the real world, but because those events did not actually take place, as it turns out, in the fictional world of the novel. The reader knows that he or she is entering into a fictional pact with McEwan from the outset, and that pact is not violated. Still, many readers feel that they have been duped by the novel’s ending. Lejeune’s model, then, cannot sufficiently explain some readers’ dissatisfaction with the ending of *Atonement*. Instead, we must turn to a model that takes into account the reader’s investment in the reality of a fictional world.

In developing her model of “fictional recentering,” which proposes “to characterize the fictional gesture in the framework of modal logic and the semantics of

possible worlds,” Marie-Laure Ryan points to the “pseudoreality” and “pseudoactuality” of fictional characters and worlds as the source of readers’ investment in fictional texts (16, 21-22). She argues that fictional worlds lack a “world-creating predicate”—a term Ryan borrows from James McCawley—such as “to dream, to intend, to believe, to consider, to fantasize, to hypothesize” (19). The absence of such a predicate means that in fiction, there is no “bridge between the actual world and the alternative possible world;” instead, “speaker, hearer, and speech act are relocated within the created world” (Ryan 22). Both the speaker and the hearer, then, agree to pretend that the possible world created by the text is the actual world, and in doing so, they treat the characters and situations as though they were real and thus deserving of empathy.

Importantly, Ryan tells us, fictional texts create not only a world, but also a full-fledged “textual universe,” complete with its own network of (second-order or embedded) alternative possible worlds. In order to keep the complex relationships among these worlds and universes clear, Ryan lays out the three modal systems at the heart of her concept of fictional recentering. First, there is our actual universe, at the center of which is the actual world; second, there is the textual universe, which is created by the text, and which has at its center the textual actual world; third, there is the system that the textual universe represents, called the referential universe, whose central world is the textual reference world, which is the world that the textual actual world represents (Ryan 24). With this typology, Ryan is able to describe various types of discourse—including nonfiction, errors, lies, fiction, and fiction with unreliable narration—as evoking possible worlds that stand in various kinds of relations with one another and with the actual world inhabited by writers and readers (28).

To return to *Atonement*, Ryan's model of fictional recentering allows for a distinction between factual and fictional discourse within a textual actual world, which in turn explains why some readers react so strongly to the novel's ending: the reader, who has temporarily relocated to the textual universe of the novel, is led to believe that the events narrated really happened in that universe, and is displeased when this understanding proves to be misguided. Still, an important question remains: what is the relationship between the world projected by Briony's novel and the world ultimately projected by McEwan's novel, the world that is revealed to be the textual actual world by the "London, 1999" section of the novel? Is the world created by Briony's novel an alternative possible world that she dreams up, a satellite to the textual actual world? Or is the difference at the level of system rather than of world—that is, is the textual universe projected by Briony's novel a misrepresentation of the reference universe that subtends McEwan's text as a whole?

The answer to these questions depends on how we classify the world created by Briony's novel. We could, for instance, classify Briony's narrative as a lie, or, less negatively, as a fantasy. There is certainly evidence to support such a classification, such as when Briony describes her narrative as a more satisfying alternative to "the bleakest realism" (McEwan 478). If we took this route, then the world Briony creates could be described as one of many alternative possible worlds that exist as satellites in the textual universe created by McEwan's novel. Alternatively, if we consider Briony an unreliable narrator, then we could say that there is a mismatch between the textual actual world projected by her novel and the textual reference world that readers assume to be at the basis of McEwan's larger narrative.

I contend that neither of these explanations is sufficient, for the simple reason that Briony is a novelist. Just as McEwan's novel exists as a work of fiction in the real world, Briony's novel exists as a work of fiction within the textual actual world produced by McEwan's text. At the time Briony writes her diary entry, the novel still does not have an audience—she makes clear that it will not be published until after her death—but she clearly intends for it to be published as a work of fiction, and thus to be read as such. As a work of fiction, Briony's narrative contains no world-creating predicate, but instead relocates its reader to the second-order or embedded fictional world it creates. Therefore, a reading of *Atonement* involves what I call *embedded recentering*, a process that Ryan's model does not completely account for.

In Ryan's model, the game of fictional recentering depends on an agreement between the author and the reader to pretend that the world projected by the text is the actual world—at least for the duration of the game (23). By contrast, the embedded recentering in *Atonement* involves a contract whose terms are clear to only one party involved in the process of narrative communication: Ian McEwan. In engaging with *Atonement*, the reader agrees to immerse himself or herself in the text and to take the world presented by the narrator as the actual world. What the reader does not realize, however, is that he or she has actually been relocated twice—first to McEwan's fictional world, and then, by virtue of the novel-within-the-novel, to Briony's fictional world. Like a reader of a fictional work that has been deceptively marked as memoir, the reader of *Atonement* mistakenly thinks that the statements made in the text are true in a world that can be deemed actual (in this case, the textual actual world). With the revelation that the first three parts of *Atonement* constitute Briony's novel, however, the reader must



reassess what constitutes the textual actual world of McEwan's text, or rather how that world is structured. This process of reassessment—which requires situating the world Briony creates as a novelist within the world that McEwan creates as a novelist—is responsible for the ending's jarring effect.

Why, then, does the ending of *Atonement* leave some readers slighted? I believe that the answer lies in how the text plays with the very concept of fictionality, or with what constitutes a world having fictional status. Ryan's model of fictional recentering helps illuminate the issues at stake and how those complexities affect reader response. Specifically, suggesting that the agreement between the author and the reader to pretend that the world projected by a fictional text is the actual world accounts for the reader's investment in that world, the model suggests why some readers feel cheated by the ending of *Atonement*—as if the rug of the textual actual world had been pulled out from under their feet. At the same time, however, *Atonement*'s process of embedded recentering invites us to rethink aspects of Ryan's account—in particular, the complexities that can result when a character *within* a fictional world creates a second-order fictional world, but isn't revealed as having done so until late in the narrative. In such cases, the second-order recentering is covert and hence unilateral, by analogy with acts of lying. Perhaps the structural similarities between acts of lying and covert acts of embedded recentering accounts for some readers' sense that both Briony and McEwan are deceivers in *Atonement*.

### ***Never Let Me Go***

Like Marie-Laure Ryan, Lubomír Doležel turns to the framework of possible-worlds semantics to deal with areas of overlap between fictional and historical worlds.

Although Doležel takes issue with the postmodernist collapsing of the distinction between historiography and the making of fiction, he asserts that the possible-worlds approach “has no quarrel with the idea of open boundary, but it couples this acknowledgment with a curiosity to know what happens...to the historical when it penetrates into fictional worlds and what happens to the fictional when it intrudes into historical worlds” (264). One mode of intrusion that Doležel discusses at length is that of counterfactual history. In creating a counterfactual history, one imagines a possible world whose history differs from that of the actual world in a rather specific way; a world in which Germany won World War II is a common example. Doležel distinguishes furthermore between two kinds of counterfactual history: that produced by the historian, and that produced by the maker of fiction.

The historian’s counterfactual history is a thought experiment that helps historians to better understand factual history. It tests the significance of historical events by imagining a world in which a particular event did not happen or happened differently, and in doing so, emphasizes “the precariousness of certain historical situations” (Doležel 266). Despite foregrounding the random factors that decide many historical outcomes, the historian’s counterfactual history does not actually question or challenge factual history. The maker of fiction’s counterfactual history, by contrast, “is a parody of classic historical fiction” (Doležel 267) that self-reflexively makes use of historical characters and situations for its “carnivalization” (McHale cited in Doležel 267).

This sweeping generalization assumes that all fiction writers who make use of counterfactual histories in their writing have a postmodernist agenda, one whose primary objective is to play with the boundary between fiction making and historiography.

Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, with its imaginative presentation of a world in which World War II was followed by the invention and institutionalization of human cloning, is an example of a fiction maker's counterfactual history. Yet *Never Let Me Go* is not a parody; it does not mock history, but instead invites its readers to heed its lessons cautiously. Of course, this is not to say that *Never Let Me Go* has no interest in postmodernism. As I argue in my first chapter, the novel acts as a postmodern rewrite of classic dystopian fiction. Arguably, however, the function of the novel's postmodern rewrite, and indeed the function of the novel's counterfactual history, is not to critique historiography, but rather to critique modern society itself. In other words, Ishiguro's counterfactual history works as a thought experiment; it lays out the possible consequences of a single historical alteration, critically evaluates those consequences, and shows how easily these possibilities could come to fruition in the actual world.

Doležel argues that the historian's counterfactual history works as a thought experiment in that it tests the significance of a historical event by presenting a world in which that event happened differently or did not happen at all (266). In *Never Let Me Go*, the historical alteration occurs in the post-1945 scientific community; according to the novel's counterfactual history, this age of scientific experimentation leads to the invention of human cloning. All of the novel's subsequent deviations from history stem from this single alteration. As the novel slowly reveals the details of its counterfactual world, the effects of this alteration—both positive and negative—come into view. For example, the clones, who in large numbers constitute a huge repository of organs, become an invaluable resource to the medical field. On the other hand, the clones themselves are subject to horrible mistreatment and human rights violations, the worst of

which, we learn, are not even revealed to Kathy and the rest of the clones from Hailsham, a school whose own guidelines for the treatment of clones are relatively benign.

Doležel points out that although historians use counterfactual history as a thought experiment, their use of this discourse mode “is not arbitrary; it can be critically evaluated” (267). In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro critically evaluates his counterfactual history by giving different weight to the positive and negative consequences of the existence of cloning. The novel, which focuses almost exclusively on the lives of clones, highlights the atrocities of their treatment. Kathy’s recollection of the deaths of Ruth and Tommy, for instance, underscores the cruelty of the system that denies the clones the ability to have long-lasting relationships. This is further emphasized by the clones’ inability to escape the system, as I discuss in my second chapter. Miss Emily’s revelation that “we’ve given you better lives than you would have otherwise” (Ishiguro 265) further stresses these atrocities; Ishiguro suggests that the reader does not even know the worst of the situation. The positive consequences, which Miss Emily explains to the clones at the end of the novel, only serve to underscore the negatives: “How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days” (Ishiguro 263). Here, Ishiguro suggests that the benefits afforded by the invention of cloning has caused the non-cloned population to turn a blind eye to the grossly unethical treatment of the clones. By weighing the costs and benefits of his counterfactual history, Ishiguro demonstrates how crucial it is that human cloning did *not* actually become an accepted practice.

In defining the historian’s counterfactual history as thought experiment, Doležel points out the importance of particularity: unless “counterfactual history focuses on

simple yes/no situations... the whole enterprise loses interpretive power and interest” (266). When the counterfactual world’s differences from the actual world become too elaborate, the counterfactual history often “reads like a fantastic story” (Doležel 267). Ishiguro’s novel does not feel fantastical. Indeed, as I discussed in my first chapter, part of what makes the novel so haunting is its familiarity. Although the effects of the invention of cloning are far-reaching, they are measurable, and they do not branch off in ways that make the world of the novel unknowable. The late-twentieth-century England of the novel, for example, feels a lot like the late-twentieth-century England of the actual world; major cities are divided by miles of open country, Norfolk is a county in the East, and popular music is distributed on cassette tape. As Marie-Laure Ryan lays out in her description of the principle of minimal departure, we fill in the gaps of the storyworld with knowledge of our own world. Given that the novel’s only marked difference is the existence of cloning, the world feels very familiar.

Doležel argues that the historian’s counterfactual history emphasizes “the precariousness of certain historical situations” (266). The striking similarity of the storyworld of *Never Let Me Go* to the actual world suggests that the actual world is dangerously close to the ethical nightmare found in the novel. Considering the recent development of cloning technologies similar to those found in the novel, the precariousness of our current situation becomes all the more palpable.

Doležel’s exploration of counterfactual history as a liminal space between fiction making and historiography provides a helpful framework for analyzing the overlap between fiction and history in *Never Let Me Go*. Ishiguro’s novel, however, challenges Doležel’s assertion that all fictional counterfactual histories engage in a postmodernist

dismantling of the border between fiction and history. Far from being a parody, the counterfactual history of *Never Let Me Go* functions as a thought experiment, an exercise which Doležel reserves for historians. In the world of Ishiguro's novel, a single deviation from factual history—the invention and widespread use of human cloning—leads to horrific consequences, including gross violations of human rights. Despite these far-reaching consequences, the world of *Never Let Me Go* feels quite similar to our own. The familiarity of the storyworld, coupled with Ishiguro's critical evaluation of the consequences of his counterfactual history, serves not only to illustrate how dangerous such an invention would have been, but also how easily it could come to fruition. Ultimately, Ishiguro's use of counterfactual history as thought experiment demonstrates how fiction makers can blend elements of fictional and factual worlds not to blur the lines between the two, but to better understand the significance of history and what it can tell us about the future.

In defending the boundary between fictional and factual discourse from the postmodernist attempts to erase it, scholars like Cohn, Ryan, and Doležel have seemingly taken the debate to its other extreme, arguing for a hard and fast boundary between the two types of discourse. Borderline cases, they argue, only serve to strengthen this distinction. I contend that each of my three case studies resides in a liminal space between fictional and factual narrative in a way that these scholars' models do not account for. I do not argue that attempts to map out a boundary between fictional and factual narratives constitute a fruitless endeavor, but instead that, in drawing our narratological maps, we must consider how contemporary examples of experimental storytelling play with the boundary in question. By analyzing areas of overlap between

fictional and factual narrative, we can better understand not only what distinguishes one type of discourse from the other, but also what happens when fictional and factual worlds collide.

## Conclusion

This study seeks to open up new lines of communication between contemporary narrative theory and contemporary narrative practice. By analyzing contemporary examples of experimental storytelling in light of existing theories of narrative, I highlight the way establishing a dialogue of this sort can benefit both parties: not only do current theories help to illuminate key aspects of my case studies, but also careful engagement with the case studies produces new questions about narrative, questions that invite us to expand and enrich existing frameworks for narrative inquiry. As I hope to have shown, our understanding of issues of intertextuality, rereading and reader response, and the interplay among fictional and factual worlds can benefit greatly from considering existing accounts of these aspects of narrative in light of the ever-growing corpus of stories at our disposal.

Thus, the ultimate goal of this thesis is not just to build upon existing work on narrative theory, but also to pave the way for even further work on these and other dimensions of narrative, especially in light of contemporary narrative experimentation. Some of these narratives, like *Atonement* and *Never Let Me Go*, subvert classic narrative conventions in ways that scholars of narrative have not yet accounted for. Others, like *Fun Home*, invite us to consider how existing theories of narrative must be expanded in order to account for the affordances and constraints of various storytelling media and the genres, such as graphic memoir, that those media accommodate. My project also generates larger questions about the specific narrative issues that are its focus; for instance, how does taking into account the differences between an initial reading and a subsequent reading affect our understanding of other issues of narrative? Is the process



of rereading also affected by adaptations of a story across media? Does intertextuality work differently across media? What happens when additional layers of embedded recentering are encountered in a narrative? By seeking out new examples of experimental storytelling and considering how key narratological issues are at play in these narratives, we can attempt to answer these questions, as we further refine and enrich our understanding of narrative itself.

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